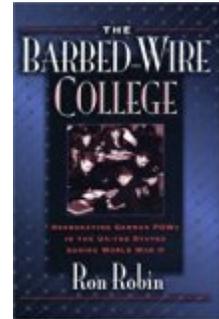


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ron Robin. *The Barbed Wire College: Reeducating German POWs in the United States during World War II.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. 224 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03700-4.

Reviewed by Mark D. Van Ells (CUNY-Queensborough)
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Few realize that during World War II the United States Army established a program to impart the principles of American democracy to German prisoners of war. In *The Barbed-Wire College*, Ron Robin of the University of Haifa examines the work of the army's Special Projects Division (SPD) of the Office of the Provost Marshal General, the unit tasked with prisoner reeducation. The work provides an illuminating glimpse into American cultural and intellectual history during World War II.

Robin originally set out to measure the success of the project, but soon discovered the effort "manifestly ineffectual" (p. ix). The author instead concentrated on the mindset of the reeducators to determine why the operation was so inept. The work of reeducating German war prisoners fell upon liberal arts professors. Because prisoner reeducation began late in the war, the SPD attracted few prominent professors. Indeed, only very few were experts in German language and history. These scholars in uniform designed a program based on the model of the American university, creating "the familiar milieu of the American college campus" (p. 10) in the camps, despite its unsuitability in the adversarial environment of the prison. The program evolved as it did, Robin suggests, because the SPD staff was less interested in producing German democrats than it was in validating a liberal arts education in an age of science.

The author describes his work as a "social history of an intellectual endeavor" (p. 12), but it will be of interest to a wide range of scholars, particularly cultural historians. For example, the elitist SPD staff strongly disapproved of using popular culture to influence prisoners, believing it would prove a distraction from reeducation. As a result, camp newspapers contained articles reminis-

cent of literary journals rather than the news from home and the light reading the POWs' craved. The SPD did show a few select films approved for their intellectual content, but only as part of a minor program in the overall reeducation effort. The study contains many other discussions that will be of interest to students of both German and American culture.

Robin bases the book largely on SPD records and other official sources. He combs through these records in an exhaustive fashion to produce an engaging portrait of an ill-defined and poorly conceived operation undermined by the ulterior motives of its administrators. Robin successfully conveys the mentality of the SPD staff, but some readers will be left wanting more. A wider range of sources would have made for a more convincing work, even within its limited scope. The prisoners' impressions of reeducation, for example, come only from SPD staff observations, not from the POWs themselves. Secondly, the author might have elaborated more on precisely how he believes the reeducation program was flawed, a point on which he is unclear. Although Robin did not intend to tell the whole story of American reeducation efforts, he might have told a bit more of it.

Ron Robin provides more than just an anatomy and postmortem of America's effort to reeducate German POWs during World War II, but also connects it to the social, cultural, and intellectual currents that steered the project to its unsuccessful conclusion. *The Barbed-Wire College* provides an unusual perspective on the history of the United States in the Second World War, as well as a glimpse into the cultural and intellectual state of the nation in the 1940s.

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